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Journey From Syria To Texas: How Syrian Refugees Deal With Resettlement To Texas And Rely On Local Help

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Journey From Syria To Texas: How Syrian Refugees Deal With Resettlement To Texas And Rely On Local Help

by

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Report

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Dedication

To my parents and husband who have always encouraged me to follow my dreams and to my dogs Gage and Roxi for faithfully keeping me company night and day as I worked on my Masters degree.

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I would also like to thank Mai Barazi for introducing me to the Kaabor family who I have profiled in my story, translating their interview from Arabic and patiently answering my questions about life in Syria and the process of refugee resettlement.

Finally, I would like to thank the Kaabors for letting me spend time with them and telling me about their life during the civil war in Syria and how they are settling down in their new home in Austin.

Abstract

Journey From Syria To Texas: How Syrian Refugees Deal With Resettlement To Texas And Rely On Local Help

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisors: H. Iris Chyi, William Minutaglio

Since the civil war began in Syria, millions of refugees have fled their country. A little over 1,500 refugees have been resettled in Texas. The Kaabors are one such family who left their home on a cold night in 2013 and two years later made their way to Austin, Texas. The Kaabor family serves as a window to illustrate the many challenges refugees from Syria face and how American cities are responding to the arrival of refugees.

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On a Sunday evening in the spring of 2017, at an apartment in north Austin, seven-year-old Mohammad Kaabor is playing the Grand Theft Auto video game in the living room. His mother Sumia, 35, is braiding her three-year-old daughter Aisha's hair. His father Osamah is away, at work cooking for a food truck serving Middle Eastern food in downtown Austin. Aisha is just learning to speak and repeats everything the other children in the family say. She has four siblings – Rama, Reem, Majed and Mohammad.

The toddler runs around and changes her clothes twice – one of her dresses is Princess Elsa's gown from the Disney movie *Frozen*. She sings a few words of *Let It Go*, the popular song from the film. Another brother is using colorful rubber bands to make a bracelet. The kids squabble, running around, teasing each other

One suddenly shouts that he broke a dish on his sister's head: "Nothing happened to her head but the plate broke".

There is more name-calling, the merry energy of a household of children, and moments of warm affection. The kids say they can make their mother laugh even when she is mad at them. One says that Mohammad can never tell a lie: "The minute he lies you can see it on his face." And his sisters admit they ask each other for help when they need to dress up.

It could be, really, like any household in America – the give and take, the lively exchanges. But the banter in the Kaabor home hides several deep scars from the death and destruction the family saw in their hometown of Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria. The Kaabors fled the civil war in Syria in November 2013 before eventually arriving in Austin in October 2015.

Since then the Kaabors have found love, acceptance and help from many quarters as they resettle and make Austin their new home. They are among the 224 Syrian refugees in Austin – one of the fastest growing, most affluent cities in the United States.

Known for its music scene, young demographic and burgeoning high-tech sectors, Austin is one prism through which the influx of Syrian refugees can be viewed and the Kaabor family illustrates the many challenges refugees from that country face. Too, the Kaabor family serves as a window into how communities in American cities are responding to the unique challenges faced by new refugees.

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"I love it here in Austin," Rama, 16, says, but admits that she still misses Syria and her hometown of Daraa. Rama would walk to school in her native land, which was just across the street from the old home. She often thinks of her cousins and friends whom she left behind. "When we started in kindergarten we were 32 students in the same class. We were always together until the seventh grade," she says.

She remembers the day she finished her English exam in the winter of 2013. "All of us finished the exam and bought some snacks and ate it." That was their last time together.

The next day, the school was closed due to heavy snow and when she went back one of the boys in her class had died because of "shelling in his house." Since then the 32 classmates have been separated. She doesn't know where her friends are any more, how many are alive and if they have fled the country or not.

Reem, 12, also speaks about the horrors of war. She says that on her last day in Syria, her best friend died. She was walking with her friend and they parted ways to go to their respective houses. As her friend was walking home, a gunshot killed her. She heard the news about her friend's death from her neighbors. "The war was scary," says Reem. Everyone was afraid to sit outside their homes because they were always expecting to hear weapons and people dying. And when air strikes became common the Kaabors decided to flee the country.

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Rama remembers “the cold and scary” night in November when they left their home in Daraa. The family fled on foot because they wanted to escape the numerous checkpoints and roadblocks set up by the Syrian army on the roads. They were worried that if they took a car, they would be stopped and would never be allowed to leave.

Rama says that they packed only one bag with some clothes, and milk and diapers for her little sister. She, along with Reem, Majed and Mohammad, walked with their parents while her father carried Aisha. They walked for eight hours but were careful to avoid the highways and streets guarded by Syrian soldiers.

After they had walked a safe distance, they found people who specialized in transporting refugees to Jordan. They drove through the desert for 10 hours until they reached the Syria-Jordan border.

Sumia says that as soon as they reached Jordan, aid workers took them to get registered as refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In Jordan, Osamah found a job in a restaurant and the Kaabors were able to rent a small apartment. The kids started going to school, but life in Jordan was not easy. “It was tough to manage. Everything was expensive and the schools were not good,” says Sumia.

A year went by and they got a call from the UNHCR asking them if they wanted to leave Jordan and resettle as refugees in America. The Kaabors decided to take the chance. They knew that another family from their hometown in Syria had also fled to Jordan – and resettled in Austin. They asked if it was possible to also move to that city in Texas that they had never been to before. After nearly a year of interviews with the UN and various US agencies, they left Jordan on October 20, 2015, took an airplane to Miami and arrived in Austin on October 21. “We suffered in Jordan and came here excited and looking for new beginnings,” says Sumia.

In Austin, volunteers from Refugee Services of Texas, a nonprofit that works with refugees -- greeted them in the airport and they were taken to their new home on a street called Anderson Lane in the burgeoning northern part of the city. They set about trying to find their way in their new city, state and country.

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Texas has long been home to refugees from across the world, including Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In the last seven years, 51,510 refugees have been resettled in Texas, the highest number resettled in the country in that time period, according to the State Department. Next comes California, where 46,868 refugees were resettled in the same time.

Since the civil war started in 2011, 1,548 Syrian refugees have arrived in Texas. Texas now has the third largest community of Syrian refugees, after California (2,247) and Michigan (2,163). Dallas and Houston each have nearly 500 Syrian refugees, followed by Austin, which has 224.

"Texas has a lot of available land and housing and has one of the lowest unemployment rates and quickest growing economies in the nation," says Faith Nibbs, an anthropology professor at Southern Methodist University and director of a refugee project in Dallas.

Given the economic climate in Texas, refugees that are resettled there usually manage to find jobs quickly and become self sufficient in a short period of time, often within 90 days of arrival – and they find the state affordable compared to other places. "We can get people in Texas jobs pretty quickly and they can actually work just above minimum wages," says Nibbs. "It is very expensive to live in New York or California. If you put someone in there and give them a job in McDonald's, they are not going to be able to survive."

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The Department of State's Refugee Admissions Program oversees refugee resettlement. The agency also works with nonprofit organizations across the country to place the refugees in particular cities and communities. The Kaabors were helped by

Refugee Services of Texas (RST), one of two nonprofits that the State Department has entrusted with resettlement in Austin.

"Texas does one of the most successful refugee resettlement programs in the USA," says Chris Kelley, a spokesperson for RST. He added that the refugee resettlement initiative in the state has had bipartisan support for the last 40 years.

But in September 2016, Texas withdrew from federal refugee resettlement program because of Gov. Greg Abbott's concerns that the federal government could not guarantee that refugees would not pose a security threat. But the move really did not prevent refugees from coming to Texas because the federal government carries out refugee resettlement.

It however changed how resettlement was carried out in the state. The federal dollars that were channeled through the state, which acted as a middleman, are now directly given to nonprofits that aid in resettlement

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In Austin, the Kaabors had no close friends and their English was not very good. They felt like they had left so much behind. When they fled, they did not carry their family pictures with them. Rama asked a cousin still in Syria to go to their house and take photos from old family albums and send them to her on WhatsApp.

Like immigrants before them, they set about the arduous task of fitting in. Not long after they arrived, Osamah was able to find a job in a gas station – even though he could barely speak a few words of English. With the guidance from workers and volunteers in Austin who assist refugees, the children were enrolled in school. The family, too, began hearing about the few dozen other Syrian refugee families in Austin – and slowly began to make connections, make friends, and learn the language. It was a tedious process, filled with uncertainty, but they found Austin especially welcoming – and that there were many people in the city willing to help them with language barriers, paperwork, and medical needs.

In the summer of 2016, the Kaabors heard about a summer camp for girls run by a nonprofit called GirlForward that operates in Austin and Chicago. They enrolled Rama in the summer camp to improve her English. After camp she decided to join a mentoring program offered by the same nonprofit. In the program, refugee girls are paired with a mentor who meets them once every week to help with homework, take them around the city or talk about relationships and careers.

Rama was paired with Anne Sudac, a nurse in a neo natal intensive care unit in Austin and it was the beginning of a relationship that has helped Rama become confident in her new country. It has helped her improve her English, her grades at school and also dream about a bright future in the U.S.

"I was super impressed with her right off the bat. It has become more and more impressive honestly and I cannot believe how well she is doing in school," says Sudac.

Now, the Kaabors feel like they can even take time to study political developments in the U.S. They are closely following President Trump's proposed travel ban from mainly Muslim majority countries in the Middle East and the new administration's policies on expedited deportations.

"We have major concerns. We hear stories that even if you did not do any mistake, someone may frame you for something you did not do," says Sumia.

The family left their country and Jordan because of the lack of security and now some of those fears are coming back, she says. "We are legal, what if something happens?" she asks. The Kaabors are currently living here as refugees but they have applied for permanent residency.

Despite the fears expressed by politicians, there has been plenty of support for refugees among faith-based groups and other nonprofits in Austin and other cities. "There is a disconnect between what the elected officials are saying and …what is happening on the ground," says Gislaine Williams, with the Refugee Council, USA, a coalition of 24 non-governmental organizations that work with refugees.

"The people who are against refugees are people who are distant and never had any contact with refugees, or they confound illegal immigration and refugees together," adds Nibbs.

One thing seems clear: As more people get involved with helping refugees, it adds a personal and human touch to the process of resettlement. Since the proposed travel bans by President Trump, "RST has seen a 1,700 percent increase in volunteers across the state," says Kelley.

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Anne Sudac, Rama's mentor from GirlForward, still helps the young woman with homework and getting acquainted with the culture of Austin. Rama has shared a few stories about her past in Syria and Jordan with Sudac. "She does not hold on to those negative experiences, She takes those experiences and turns them around into something positive and she is so grateful and so happy," says Sudac.

Sudac, 35, learned about GirlForward and its programs from a friend. She started volunteering in September 2016 and was paired with Rama because Rama also hopes to become a nurse.

"We hang out and talk and if there is something on her mind or goals that she has, we try to map out a way to achieve those goals. We have quarterly goals and yearly goals," says Sudac.

Sudac and Rama try to meet once a week for two hours. With their busy schedules, it is sometimes not possible, but Sudac says that Rama has her phone number and she can text or call any time.

Sudac has taken Rama to museums and the state capitol, and told her about American history and how the government functions in the U.S. She also helps Rama with homework. "One of Rama's goals was to get a B grade in algebra. We focused on algebra a lot," says Sudac. "She is exceeding expectations. I told her she does not need to be a mentee. She must become a mentor."

Sudac is also learning a lot from Rama and her family. “I love how close the family is and I am picking up on things that I want to instill in my life from their culture,” says Sudac. “The closeness of their family is very inspiring.”

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On one Wednesday afternoon, Osamah and Sumia welcome Mai Barazi to their apartment. Barazi is a volunteer with a nonprofit called Syrian American Refugee Aid (SARA), and she is a student at the University of Texas at Austin.

The four older children are in school and Aisha is sleeping inside. Barazi hugs Sumia and they greet each other with three kisses– first on the right cheek, then left and then right again.

The smell of freshly made hummus is wafting in the air. Osamah is adding the finishing touches to a traditional Syrian dish called tese'yeh, made with chickpeas, garlic, lemon, yogurt and pita bread.

Already on the table is some falafel, freshly cut pickles and salad made with fava beans. Barazi’s face lights up as she sees all the food. Tese'yeh is commonly made after finishing Friday prayers, says Barazi. She immediately takes a photo to send to her husband. “He is going to be very jealous when he sees this,” she says.

Sumia is not a passionate cook. Osamah on the other hand has always loved to cook, but back home in Syria he was not a chef. He drove trucks that carried gas from one city to another. He started working in a restaurant once they moved to Jordan in 2013. Today he works at a Middle Eastern food truck in Austin and Barazi often visits him when she craves good food.

Over lunch, Sumia reminisces about her house in Syria and says that they had finished remodeling their home when they had to flee. “I had just finished hanging the new curtains,” she says.

Their house had seven rooms and a lot of space for the children to play. They also had a garden with two large olive trees. They made fresh oil, from homegrown olives, for cooking. The memories still make the adjustments to Austin hard: Unlike their children, Sumia and Osamah are not yet comfortable with speaking English. They converse with each other and with Barazi in Arabic. Sumia's English is better than her husband's because she attended a few classes when she came to the U.S. Osamah had to find a job immediately after coming to Austin and has not had a chance to really learn English.

Osamah says that SARA pushed him to work hard. He says that if he missed a bus and called volunteers for help, they would help him find a bike from the nearest bike rack or tell him where to get the next bus so he could reach his destination.

SARA helped the Kaabors furnish their house, and provided them with monetary support to pay for the children's education and also paid for Sumia's English classes. "We need to make them (Syrian refugees) successful people and part of this community," says Maya Hinedi, director and co-founder of SARA.

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Barazi and her husband, Dr. Hachem Dadouch, are also from Syria. Barazi worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Damascus for eight years, writing recommendations for refugee resettlement.

Dr. Dadouch had initially come to the US in 1989 to pursue his medical residency in Yale. He went back to his hometown of Damascus, Syria 10 years later. He then established two emergency rooms in Damascus and was the program director of emergency medicine at the university of Damascus. He says that he had a good life in his country until the war changed everything,

Dr. Dadouch and Barazi left Syria in 2012. "Initially we thought it is going to be short but at some point it was very clear that it is going to last for years and it is going to be a merciless war," says Dr. Dadouch.

Once he made the decision to leave Syria, he applied to hospitals in the U.S. as an emergency room physician. His first offer came from the Baptist Medical Center in Brownsville, Texas. Two years later he moved to Austin where he continues to work as an emergency room doctor in a hospital in South Austin.

In his spare time, he devotes his life to Syrian refugees coming to Austin -- and those still living in refugee camps in Jordan. He worries, particularly about how the refugees in Austin can pay for their medical expenses: "Even though some of them have Medicaid they have a big language barrier, they cannot optimally use the system here," he says.

Every Friday afternoon Dr. Dadouch runs a free clinic in Austin to help Syrians who need medical help. If there is an emergency, he sometimes visits them in their home.

He also volunteers with a Boston-based group called Atlantic Humanitarian Relief. With doctors from across the world, he has visited refugee camps in Jordan. "We give them medication for high blood pressure, diabetes and cholesterol. We also treat trauma related injuries like amputations and burns."

Dr. Dadouch has also started a WhatsApp group with Syrian refugee families so they can share information, concerns and opportunities. Barazi says that the WhatsApp group was constantly buzzing in the days following President Trump's travel ban.

Now, Barazi is a volunteer of SARA and helps the refugees translate a variety of things – government paperwork or emails from their children's school. A few weeks ago she met Osamah and helped him write his resume.

Barazi says she can relate to the incoming refugees. She remembers the days right before she left Syria. "We could hear the shooting and screaming from the U.N. building where I worked."

Both Barazi's and Dr. Dadouch's parents live in Damascus. But they have not been able to go back to visit them. And now, Barazi says she sometimes feels guilty for her comfortable life in Austin when she hears news that someone she knew in her hometown has died. But she tries to channel this grief to help her countrymen who are in Austin.

"The refugees have to learn English and become independent in 6 or 7 months from the time they arrive. That is impossible," she says. Barazi says she does whatever she can to help them become self sufficient, be it helping them with English or finding them furniture or providing them monetary support.

Sumia remembers how happy her family was when they met Barazi and other volunteers from SARA for the first time. It was comforting to speak to the volunteers in their own language. "Even if they don't give you anything else, just the fact that someone speaks your language helps you feel less like a stranger," says Sumia.

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On a Friday night, around 9 p.m., a Middle Eastern food truck in downtown Austin has a steady inflow of customers. Osamah Kaabor is handling all the work by himself.

"Hello! How are you sir," he greets his customers with a smile. Once the order has been placed, he says: "In 10 minutes it will be ready."

Inside the trailer, Osamah is multi-tasking. He arranges meats on a skewer and puts it in an electric grill for making kebabs. He then runs to the stove, throws more meat on a pan and expertly cuts it while it cooks. Once that is done, he fries a few falafels, makes some potato fries and then checks on the kebabs. By then another customer comes by. Osamah is sweating from the effort.

Doing so many things at once is tough he says but he loves his job. As soon as the Kaabors came to Austin, Osamah had to find work. He got the job at the food truck in December 2016. Since then, he has tried to pick up more English. He observes people and he says that is how he has learned to speak the language better. Today, he is able to take orders at the food truck and deliver without a hitch. "I like to speak English. Everyday I am learning one or two new words," says Osamah.

His boss, Fadi Tantah, is the owner of the food truck and a busy man. He is in the process of opening a third truck. Originally from Syria, Tantah moved to Austin seven

years ago as an immigrant and started the food truck in 2015. "I went with my wife to a Mediterranean restaurant here. I did not like the shawarma (grilled meat) because it was not like what I had in my country," he says.

Tantah decided to use his grandmother's recipes and started his own truck. Tantah was open for business from 11 am to midnight but as the food truck became popular, his customers asked that he stay open for longer. Tantah decided to hire someone to help him.

Refugee workers who had eaten at Osamah's apartment, recommended him to Tantah. "He is honest, works hard. He comes to work on time," says Tantah, who also hired another Syrian refugee at another truck. He hopes that as his business grows, he will be able to provide employment to more Syrian refugees.

Osamah's days are long. He works about 15 hours a day. "It is good for the future," he says. He adds that he came to America mainly for his children. All of his kids have dreams and he wants to help them achieve them.

"I don't have time to meet friends, for shopping, to spend time with my family. But I am happy for my kids."

At the food truck, another customer asks for a falafel wrap to go. Osamah tells him that it will take 10 minutes. The customer is in a hurry and asks if he can make the food any faster. "Give me five minutes," he says and quickly makes the wrap. "I don't like when customers go without food," says Osamah

Osamah is worried about his family even though he is optimistic about what the future holds for them in America. His son Majed is doing well in school but still carries scars from the war. "Majed is not a child enjoying childhood . . . he has some worries and thoughts about life. Our kids matured early," he says.

Every member of the family has dreams about what they want to become in America. Osamah dreams about owning his own restaurant. Sumia, Rama and Reem want to be nurses. Majed wants to become a doctor and Mohammad wants to become a pilot.

“We are not like the other families who feel depressed or regret. We knew that moving to the U.S. was the right thing to do,” says Sumia

PHOTOS OF OSAMAH KAABOR WORKING AT

THE FOOD TRUCK


VINYL GLOVES


WE DELIVER
UBER
Square
SHOP SMALL
VISA

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